

# What you can do to stay healthy

## Tips for home or work to help you live fully and stay healthy:

- avoid things that can irritate your lungs, such as smoke, pollution, and air that is cold and dry
- use an air conditioner or air filter in your home or office
- take rest breaks during the day
- get regular exercise to stay as strong as you can
- eat well to keep up your strength

## Things to consider when living with COPD

**Flare-ups.** You may have flare-ups as your symptoms worsen. It's important to know what to do if this happens. Your doctor can prescribe medicines to help —but if an attack is severe, you may need to go to the emergency room or call 911.

**Depression and Anxiety.** Knowing that you have a disease that worsens over time can be hard. It's common to feel sad or hopeless at times. Having trouble breathing can also make you feel very anxious. If these feelings last, be sure to tell your doctor. Counseling, medicine, and support groups can help you cope.

**End of Life Issues.** Speak with your doctor about what kinds of treatment you want if your breathing problems become life-threatening. You may want to write a living will for your peace of mind. You can also choose a health care agent to make decisions for you. It can be comforting to know that you will get the type of care you want.

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... providing quality health care to our nation's Veterans

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## Living with COPD

Chronic Obstructive  
Pulmonary Disease



**Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease is the fourth leading cause of death in America. COPD cannot be cured, but it can be managed. Learn the facts about COPD ... and what you can do to stay healthy.**

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# What is COPD?

**COPD is a lung disease that makes it hard to breathe.** It is a result of damage to the lungs over many years, and is caused by things that may have irritated your lungs.

**COPD is often a mix of two diseases:**

**1. Chronic Bronchitis.** In chronic bronchitis, the airways that carry air to the lungs get inflamed and make a lot of mucus. This can narrow or block the airways, making it hard for you to breathe.

**2. Emphysema.** In a healthy person, the tiny air sacs in the lungs are like balloons. As you breathe in and out, they get bigger and smaller to move air through your lungs. But with emphysema, these air sacs are damaged and lose their stretch. Less air gets in and out of the lungs, which makes you feel short of breath.

*COPD gets worse over time. You can't undo the damage to your lungs, but you can take steps to prevent more damage and feel better ... make an appointment with your doctor today!*

## How COPD is Diagnosed

*To determine if you have COPD, a doctor will:*

- do a physical exam and listen to your lungs
- ask you questions about your past health and whether you have been exposed to things that can irritate your lungs (including tobacco smoke)
- have you do breathing tests, including spirometry, to find out how well your lungs work
- do chest x-rays and other tests to help rule out other problems that may be causing symptoms

*Hungry for air? Learn the facts about COPD ...*

## What *causes* COPD?

**COPD is most often caused by smoking.** Over time, breathing the tobacco smoke irritates the airways and destroys the stretchy fibers in the lungs.

**Other things that may put you at risk for COPD include breathing chemical fumes, dust or air pollution over a long period of time.** Secondhand smoke is also bad.

**You may be more likely to get COPD if you had several serious lung infections as a child.** People who get emphysema in their 30s or 40s may have a disorder that runs in families, called alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency but this is rare.

It usually takes many years for the lung damage to start causing COPD symptoms. COPD is most common in people who are older than 60.

## Symptoms of COPD

- a long-chronic cough
- mucus that comes up when you cough
- shortness of breath that worsens with exercise

*As COPD gets worse, you may be short of breath even when you do simple things like get dressed or fix a meal. It gets harder to eat or exercise, and breathing takes much more energy. People often lose weight and get weaker.*

*At times your symptoms may suddenly flare up and get much worse. This is called a COPD exacerbation. An exacerbation can range from mild to life-threatening. The longer you have COPD, the more severe the flare-ups will become.*

## How *is* COPD treated?

**The single most important thing you can do if you are diagnosed with COPD is to stop smoking.** It's never too late to quit. No matter how long you have smoked or how serious your COPD is, becoming a non-smoker can help stop the damage to your lungs.

**Your doctor can prescribe treatments that may help you manage your COPD symptoms and feel better.**

• **Medicines can help you breath easier.** Most of them are inhaled so they go straight to your lungs. If you get an inhaler, it is very important to use it just the way your doctor shows you.

• **A lung (or pulmonary) rehab program can help you learn to manage COPD.** Your health team can teach you how to breathe easier, exercise, and eat well.

• **In time, you may need to use oxygen some or most of the time.**

People who have COPD are more likely to get lung infections, so you will need to get a flu shot and a pneumonia shot every year. It may not prevent you from getting ill, but if you do, you probably will not be as sick.

Your VA health care team is committed to educating you and keeping you informed about your condition so that you become as proactive as possible in maintaining good health. There are steps you can take to breath better if you are diagnosed with COPD. That is why it is vital that you get diagnosed and talk with your doctor. You owe it to yourself — and your loved ones — to treat and manage your COPD and live as fully as possible. **Today and in the future, we are here for you.**